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STAGES OF WRITING MATURATION

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PART I

THE PROJECT

1. ASSESSMENT APPROACHES:

It must be for nearly a century now that we have been trying on many fronts to improve our methods for assessing writing both reliably and de vely, searching for a practical combination of both.

As a practising secondary school teacher I soon knew all about assessing writing, for of course I had unerring instincts and, in my time, the further guidance and prescription of the annual report of the Ontario Ministry of Education on the Grade 13 external English Composition examination. I knew quite precisely, therefore, what a "First" was and a "Pass"; I knew all the MAJOR errors (three of which in an essay equalled failure) and a fascinating compendium of MINOR errors. This, of course, was all in the way of producing accurate marks and maintaining standards. With the collapse of the external examination system and, as the newspapers and universities proclaimed, a corresponding collapse of standards, we were deprived of the infallible wisdom of the Ministry of Education.

The experienced teachers (almost all now retired) were left with their memories; and their students, now the teachers, with the memory of their experiences as victims - all productive of unreliability and a "deficit" or "red circle" model of writing assessment: What's left that's any good when one has caught all the errors.

Meantime educational research went on with increased interest in large scale assessment: what is performance in a system? a province or state? a nation? And what characterizes or tends to characterize the writing that we are judging?

This is not an historical study on large-scale assessment of writing. I want to note only two points: first, that essentially three useful "systems" emerged, and, second, that rich accurate description of what students do when they write is not consistent with a high degree of reliability in scoring. You can't get both at once.

The three systems that emerged were **holistic** (rapid impression) **scoring**, **analytic scoring**, and a variety of forms of what I am calling here **"descriptive analysis"** - the most famous of which is **"primary trait"** scoring as employed in the American National Assessment of Educational Progress. This last was introduced in the second round, not because holistic scoring was inaccurate and inefficient, but because descriptors did not and could not emerge from it.

Two other types of analysis, not related to the essay as a whole, have been error frequency and measures of syntactic maturity. I have not found the latter at all helpful in providing useful guidance to students or teachers.

In the present study **holistic scoring**, a new form of **descriptive analysis**, and (for one writing mode only) a study of patterns of **error frequency** have been undertaken - the approach and outcomes of the descriptive analysis reported in **Part II** and of the error frequency study in **Part III**.

Because of the unexpectedly large participation by systems and the desire of each system to have a measure of writing achievement specific to that system, holistic scoring was employed only at the level of the system (multiple scoring on a scale of 1-10 with all student/school identifiers removed, and in cross-grade or cross-stream assessment Grade and Level identification remained as well). The procedure was fundamentally that of Britton, Martin, and Rosen (1966) with "burial" of essays for calibrating scorers in use of the scale as employed in my various Northwest Territories writing assessments (q.v.). I do commend the method for high reliability in judging relative writing performance, but I am not rehearsing this activity in the present report.

The descriptive analysis is a refinement of an approach to reasonably objective description of the writing I developed over the period from 1985-91 in assessing NWT writing. The error frequency approach is as used there and in my earlier studies of writing in Ontario Grades 6-12 ca. 1976-80 and in the **Interface** Study (1976).

2. THE PROJECT:

The initial objectives were these:

1. To identify stages of maturation in writing across non-adjacent grades (proposed as 6, 8, 10, 12).

2. To develop resources for the writing program based upon these findings - resources for selective use to complement the writing program.

The proposed design was strictly limited: a few classes across four or so systems at the grades noted, with collective holistic scoring followed by the analyses.

However, those systems that did respond, four English plus later a French-language system [studied then separately], did so on such a massive scale, each with its own concerns and objectives in mind, and with differing choices of grades/levels and writing prompts, that we were constrained to run wholly independent assessments by system - each with its own holistic scoring and descriptive analysis - with scores returned to students promptly - and with reports tailored to each's system's needs. Altogether over 3600 essays and stories were scored over these five systems and various combinations of Grades from 4 through 12.

A description of the entire process requires a report of its own, which this is not!

An outcome we had hoped for in the long run - that systems would adopt some of our procedures and analyses in their own large-scale assessments of writing - became instead the starting point. More precisely, our intended study became a derivative one.

We seized and photocopied madly "en route" some 10 - 20% of the essays from the system studies before essays and scores were returned to the students. In selecting our sample we sought to be attentive to the performance range: i.e. we drew our cross-system sample on the basis of the within-system holistic scores. Hence the sample per mode that we employed is roughly random, stratified by score - a reasonably balanced representation at all grades/levels from best to weakest. This was a critical step (and one wishes there had been leisure to do it with greater care) in assuring that any description for a grade/level fairly represented that grade or level.

Participating systems were given the choice of four modes and prompts:

Personal Narrative: Trouble always starts when ... is around.

Fantasy: Polar bear in the shower.

Explanatory: How to Shop for a .....

Point of View: An Issue of Concern.

The full prompts are appended. Each of these had been extensively pre-tested in at least one setting, the first three in several settings and across a number of grades.

Three of the four systems were especially interested in performance at Grade 8 versus Grade 9, given the recent Ministry of Education thrust to "de-stream" Grade 9 and to consider 7-8-9 a division: the **Transition Years**. Consequently our study, especially of personal narrative and explanatory writing, focused on comparison of Grade 8 and 9 rather than non-adjacent grades as originally intended. An outcome of this emphasis was the discovery of what appears to be a fall-back in effectiveness in Grade 9, as will be seen in a number of categories reported in **Part II** and in Paragraphing/Organization as reported in **Part III**.

A further outcome of this variety of response by system was inconsistency in our "by grade and level" gathering across modes. We have large representation at several grades in some modes, not so in others. For example, in Personal Narrative we have no Grade 11 or 12; in Fantasy, 10 General but no 10 Advanced; and very skimpy representation of Point of View writing except at Grades 6 and 8.

Consequently the present report chiefly focuses on Personal Narrative, Explanatory, and Fantasy. A separate, less formal, report exists for Point of View, but only a few observations are provided here concerning that mode.

As noted above, we drew in considerable haste a sample from the writing across the four systems, taking care to see that the whole performance range was reasonably represented. The following table reveals our sample (which, when few from a grade or stream wrote, included all from that group):

SAMPLE AS PERCENTAGE OF SET OF AVAILABLE ESSAYS

Grade	NARRATIVE N	NARRATIVE %	FANTASY N	FANTASY %	EXPLANATORY N	EXPLANATORY %	POINT OF VIEW N	POINT OF VIEW %
4	321	14	116	22				
6	241	20	159	20	142	28	58	33
8	671	12	205	20	503	13	105	53
9 Adv.	249	12	77	29	222*	11		
9 Gen.	124	26			146	23	22	50
9 Bas.	7	100			10	100		
10 Enr.	28	32			27	44	27	37
10 Adv.	125	27			60	33		
10 Gen.	110	24	43	15	23	52		
11 Adv.							7	100
12 Adv.			29	52	28	21		

* Plus 30 essays from a mixed stream Grade 9 in Toronto, coded on graphs as 9M.

The essays drawn for the fresh and independent descriptive analysis had all grade level and system identification removed, and essays from the various grades and levels were distributed across sets by mode. These were then descriptively analyzed by a team of teachers plus myself and the Research Officer. All members of that team but one had been previously involved in in-system scoring of the writing.

Participating systems were the Carleton Board of Education (chiefly urban, surrounding Ottawa), Prescott and Russell County (chiefly rural), Lennox and Addington County (chiefly rural) and Stormont-Dundas-Glengarry Catholic (mixed urban and rural).

The codes "Advanced", "General" and "Basic" will be meaningful at once to Ontario teachers. These are the three principal streams at secondary. Some schools also offer courses at the "Gifted" level: hence we picked up a class of Grade 10's here which we have labelled Enriched (to keep "G" for General). The Advanced is academic stream (potentially university-bound); General for graduation to work or community college; Basic - emphasis on occupational, practical - most of whom have had low academic success in elementary.

PART II

THE DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

(Personal Narrative, Explanatory Writing, Fantasy with briefer notation concerning Point of View)

For each prompt a response form was developed for recording the various features to be found in the writing. **The four forms are appended and should be consulted as various findings are discussed.**

Most categories and scales are likely to be appropriate for other prompts in the same mode, but a number are modified to match the particular prompt. This will be most evident for "Polar Bear in the Shower". It would be our recommendation that for similar analyses teachers use a common prompt or a closely similar set and modify categories to reflect the task. Some categories may be viewed as of relatively small importance, and may be omitted or replaced by others of interest to those conducting the assessment. Note that the intent here is not to judge individual pieces of writing or produce scores; it is an effort to explore the pattern of response.

Emphasis is on positive characterization rather than deficit.

For many features it is simply of interest to know what choices writers made. For example, was dialogue employed? It is one option in a repertoire of options students might use, might use extensively, and, where used, may be used more or less effectively. The absence of its use in no way implies deficit or fault.

Other features or characteristics of the writing (for that prompt in that mode) may be considered essential or very highly desirable: coherence, focus; in explanation - sequence, etc.; and here it is important to determine whether the feature is evident at all and with what degree of effectiveness.

So some features are considered as present/absent (e.g. use of suspense in narrative), others in terms as well of extensiveness of use (humour), and others (focus, coherence) as to quality.

The questions become, then,

- **What do students do when they write? (and tend not to do?)**
- **For particular features, how well?**
- **What relationship, if any, exists between the exhibition of particular features and stages in writing maturation?**
- **Are some features present/effective in a large proportion of essays across most grades/levels?**
- **Do some features appear (and under control) in later grades, but not extensively in early grades?**

Our study is restricted by what participating systems chose: For Personal Narrative our study embraces alternative grades from 4-10, plus Grade 9. Fantasy is well represented at 4, 6, 8 but secondary school classes are spotty. The best-cross grade representation is for Explanation - alternate grades plus Grade 9 from 6-12, though we lack 12 General. Point of View representation except for Grades 6 and 8 is spotty.

Again, in considering our analysis of patterns, please consult the appropriate chart appended. Out of concern about length, we have not included illustrative samples from the writing; these do appear in generous quantity in the units developed for the writing program.

PERSONAL NARRATIVE
(inclusive of some parallels with Fantasy)

DECISIONS:

Choice of troublemaker [other(s) versus self] and mode of treatment [most often "true with some exaggeration"] seemed unrelated to age or grade. The choice of "other person" was frequent, varying across grades and levels between 67% and 90%.

STRUCTURE:

Setting (or "context"):

At least minimal attention to setting was achieved by 77% of Grade 6, 76% of Grade 4, and for the others, over 80%.

A full "Yes": Over 75% - 10E, 10A
Over 60% - 9A, 8
Over 40% (but less than 50%) - 10G, 9G, 6
Over 30% - 9B
Over 20% - 4

Most students from Grade 4 up have awareness of the importance of setting or context, but effectiveness does appear to relate to maturation. There is a clear separation between Grade 8 and Advanced level 9 and 10 on the one hand, and Grades 4, 6 and other levels of secondary on the other.

Sense of an **Ending**:

Yes or "to some extent" for 72% (Grade 4), 68% (Grade 6), and 78% (Grade 10G), with the remainder exceeding 80%. Again we find awareness of this feature in most writers across all grades studied; the difference lies in effectiveness.

Judged effective (a fitting and clear end point):

10E - 78%	9A - 52%	8 - 49%
10A - 48%	9G - 18%	6 - 28%
10G - 45%	9B - 32%	4 - 26%

Observe here both the "flat line" across Grades 8, 9 and 10 Advanced and the quite striking leap from Grades 6 to Grade 8. This seems to be a strategy or skill that develops for a good many quite naturally about Grade 7.

STRATEGIES:

The following table summarizes the use of the strategies of suspense, dialogue and humour across modes. Evidently choice is strongly influenced by the mode and the prompt. Dashes indicate that we had no writing in the mode from that grade.

SUMMARY OF CHOICES
PERCENTAGE USE: NARRATIVE (TR) and FANTASY (PB)

GRADE	SUSPENSE		DIALOGUE		HUMOUR	
	TR	PB	TR	PB	TR	PB
12A	-	67	-	33	-	80
10E	78	-	33	-	55	-
10A	57	-	25	-	37	-
10G	17	67	13	33	13	50
9A	46	64	26	50	28	55
9G	22	-	10	-	15	-
9B	44	-	6	-	18	-
8	40	55	44	50	44	58
6	23	42	14	61	31	47
4	17	23	15	46	26	38

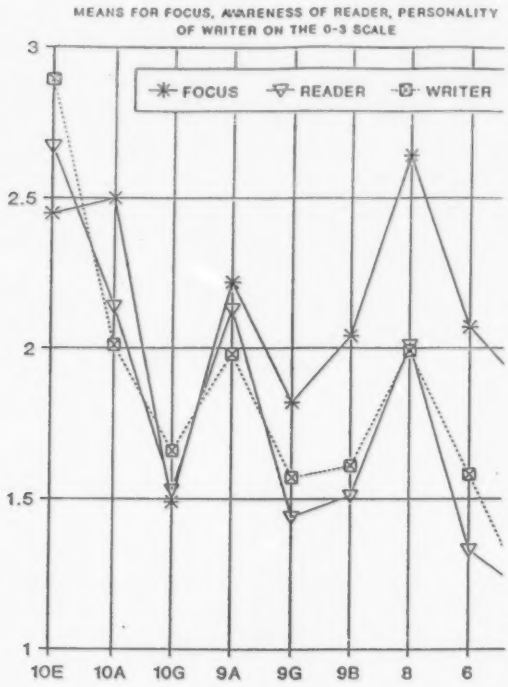
This table condenses a considerable amount of information. For example, were one to consider narrative only at Grade 6, a reasonable conclusion would be that most students do not have either suspense or dialogue as strategies in their writing repertoire; performance in fantasy, however, shows otherwise. A conclusion of some importance concerning judgements of student writing also emerges: it is inappropriate to draw many conclusions from the exhibition of a single sample or writing in a single mode. A strong case at once for the **portfolio** in assessing/describing writing performance on an individual basis.

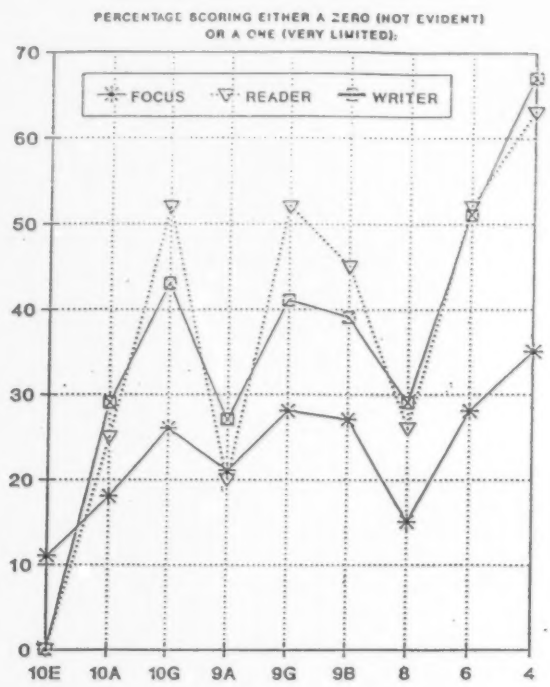
SCALED FEATURES: FOCUS, AWARENESS OF READER, PERSONALITY OF THE WRITER:

These were the features for Personal Narrative where a 0 - 3 scale was employed. A zero in general means a feature is wholly lacking.

The accompanying graphs represent the information in two ways: the **mean** or average score by grade/level on the 0 - 3 scale, and the **percentage receiving a 0 or 1** (= feature lacking or virtually absent, ineffectual). The former graph provides a quick picture of trends; the latter perhaps gives better insight into numbers of students not yet adept in that respect.

For example: For **focus** in narrative, 10 General averages about 1.5 on the 0 - 3 scale, though only about 26% received a 0 or 1; about three-quarters exhibited some degree of success.





Four points stand out at once as we examine these features together:

(1) **Awareness of Reader** and **Personality of the Writer** are very strongly associated - almost two sides of the same coin, or overlapping strategies contributing to both effects.

(2) These same two features are much less frequently present and effective for most grades and levels than is **focus**, with **Awareness of Reader** especially lacking in General and Basic Level writing.

(3) The gain with respect to these is very pronounced from Grade 6 to Grade 8. (Clearly a maturation gain of some importance - not later reflected in General and Basic.)

(4) If we take the three features together, Grade 8 performance seems quite as strong as Grade 9 Advanced (and note that Grade 8 contains the "General" and "Basic" writers of the future).

This last point is worthy of remark. It is not a "blip" or set of blips, for we have other evidence. A very large number of the Grade 8 and 9 essays came from a system in which all Grade 8's and all second semester 9's wrote. Further Grade 8 and 9 were scored there together by the same teachers with grade and student identification masked. What the teachers found, somewhat to their dismay when holistic scores were compared, was that average performance at Grade 8 was equal to Grade 9 Advanced.

Data from our descriptive analysis as well as from holistic scoring all tend to the same conclusion: Given that potential "General" and "Basic" level writers are part of the grade 8 class, we must assume some decline in average performance in writing in Grade 9, with some "retrieval" in Grade 10. Further virtually all graphs show striking differences between Advanced and General level writers: streaming (precisely that which the Ontario Ministry of Education proposes now to discontinue at Grade 9 at least) "works" as a separator of writers from non-writers.

Those strategies that show the **writer's sensitivity to his/her reader** and which effectively reveal the **writer's personality** reflect, on the whole, the more mature writer, and the techniques are quite significantly widespread by Grade 8. Gains from that point, excepting our small group of 10 Enriched, are not striking.

Focus, the ability to centre our attention on the troublemaker around one principal event, was usually a very important contributor to a story's success. Unlike the previous features, it is already strongly in evidence in Grade 4 and increases strongly especially between Grades 6 and 8 to the point, one might well argue, that it may be perceived as a reasonable expectation for Grade 8.

FANTASY: POLAR BEAR IN THE SHOWER

CHOICES OF STRATEGIES: SUSPENSE, HUMOUR, DIALOGUE:

Use of these features has been reported with data on Personal Narrative. Because humour was so little used for narrative, we did not report effectiveness on the 0 - 3 scale; for fantasy the average was quite high: **1.9** in Grades 6 and 8; **2.0** in Grades 4 and 10G; **2.3** in 9A and 12A. That is to say: on the whole, whatever the grade or level students who chose humour tended, in this mode, to be at least moderately effective, and many revealed excellence.

SETTING and "CHOICE OF WORLD":

Two other features were of a check-off variety: **Setting** and **"Choice of World"**.

80% or more of all writers, whatever the grade and level, provided at least minimal **setting** or **context**. The percentages receiving an unqualified "YES" (= at least adequate) were as follows:

12A - 87%	8 - 67%
10G - 65%	6 - 46%
9A - 68%	4 - 42%

As with personal narrative, we find a major gain for this feature between Grades 6 and 8, and the "flattening" between Grade 8 and Grade 9 Advanced.

Choice of world is especially important in fantasy. The student has been invited to enter a "world" where polar bears can, if rarely, be found taking a bathroom shower and where the writer and the bear can engage each other.

Some students ducked the challenge and treated the bear as object rather than as a personality: the bear had escaped from the zoo, it was dangerous, it had to be shot or returned to the zoo - so the bear was just a bear, little or no "magic" and not "engage-able". Some got trapped between worlds, so that one find elements of the magical but the fantasy world is not sustained. Others entered an imaginary world where bears could talk, take showers, etc. and sustained it. This is what is meant by our categories under "World".

For those who entered an imaginary world, how did they "exit"? How did they end the story? Some sustained the magic to the end: we are, having entered the writer's imaginary world, left "wondering" - did it maybe happen? Others relied on the "only a dream" escape, returning us wholly to the real world. And some endings were simply not effective either in sustaining or exiting.

The pattern in response to these questions is fascinating. The "no world established" group is small in all grades (none at Grade 12, top of 14% in 10G). For the real world/imaginary world observe (as per cent).

CHOICE OF WORLD

Grade	N	Imaginary	Real	None
12A	15	47	53	0
10G	14	7	79	14
9A	22	36	59	5
8	39	44	54	3
6	32	59	28	13
4	26	35	58	8

When one attempts to tease out a maturation pattern (on the assumption that the better response is the creation of an imaginary world), the figures here seem to suggest that maturation defined as creation and maintenance of a hypothetical world reaches in apogee in Grade 6, falling away after that point! Though the "N" is small, it appears certain that students in 10G, not on the whole enjoying a successful academic career, have much trouble entering into the spirit, as it were.

I cannot account for the trend, but only hypothesize: Do we in schools tend to drive the imaginative, the magical world out as we push students up the grades to more and more serious education? Is this a part of "growing up" - the Dylan Thomas world of "once below a time" displaced by seriousness? Is our society's interest in violence at work - variations on shoot or "terminate" the damn' bear? It would be interesting at the classroom level, especially above Grade 6, to pursue the question and to encourage exploration into imaginary realms.

Given the size of our sample and the percentage choosing an imaginary world, observations on the endings of the stories (the "exit") must be quite limited. The "dream" option was only moderately popular. The percentages judged ineffective were about 70% at Grade 4, 40% at Grades 6 and 8, 33% at Grade 9A. For 10G and 12A the "N" is too small to be useful.

THE FEATURES ON THE 0 - 3 SCALE:

All other features in the descriptive analysis of fantasy were judged on a 0 - 3 scale - a "zero" indicating virtual absence and a "one" meaning generally ineffectual. As with the Personal Narrative features, the graphs on the page following provide the mean scores by grade and the percentages obtaining a 0 or 1.

AWARENESS OF READER, PERSONALITY OF THE WRITER, ENGAGEMENT:

At some grades the association of these features is very strong, as it was throughout for personal narrative. However, at Grade 8 and especially Grade 9 and 12 Advanced, "writer's personality" emerges very strikingly - almost all students in these latter two groups scoring at a 2 or a 3, while the gain in reader awareness is much more modest.

Where there is genuine engagement with the bear (rather than the bear as mere object), the writer as one of the two principal actors in the story is almost certainly going to reveal his/her personality, so there is inevitably "interference" here, of a positive sort, with "engagement".

On these features as well as "engagement" we do observe a fairly striking gain from Grade 8 to Grade 9 (most definitely not characteristic of most features for personal narrative).

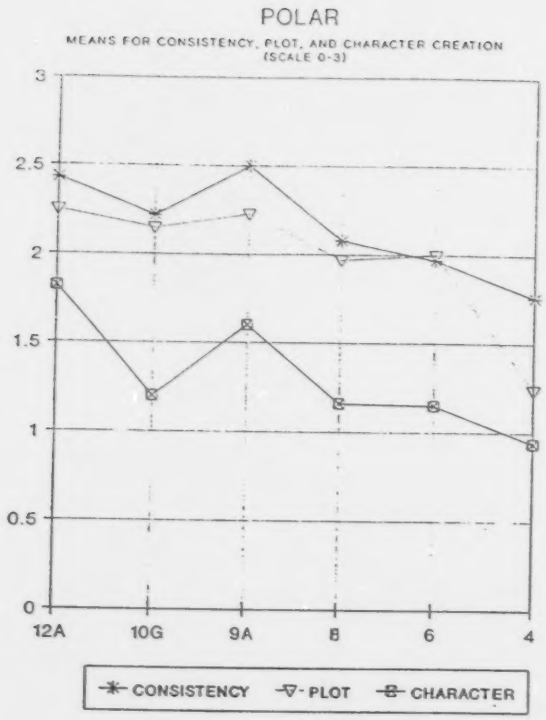
ENGAGEMENT and CHARACTERIZATION:

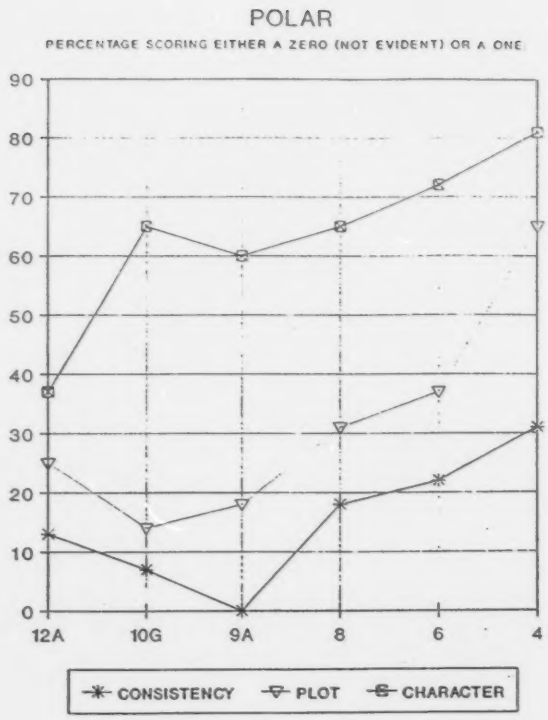
The "cluster" effect for **Engagement** and the very thin picture for **Characterization** is partly the result of the writer's initial "treatment" decision: whether to enter into the fantasy world where polar bears really can appear in people's bathrooms, have a little chat, reveal a personality, etc. When students chose a "real world" instead in which polar bears appear in bathrooms only after an escape from a zoo and have to be recaptured or shot [the bear is an object for removal, an impediment to home life] or failed to establish and sustain a "world" at all, the writing isn't likely to feature "engagement", "characterization" of the bear, or perhaps even reveal much of the writer's personality.

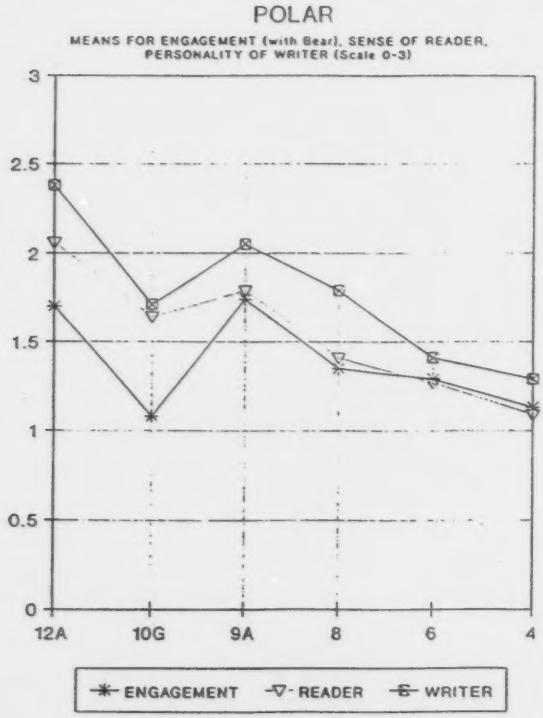
Characterization of the bear (obviously influenced by the "choice of world") presents a flat and undistinguished picture across grades and levels. There is gain on this factor as one proceeds through the grades, but the countervailing choice (fewer students above Grade 6 choosing the fantasy world where the bear would be given "character") probably undermines the picture: the story is likely that senior writers are considerably more effective in character creation/development, but in this mode fewer chose the route in story development that would have revealed that ability.

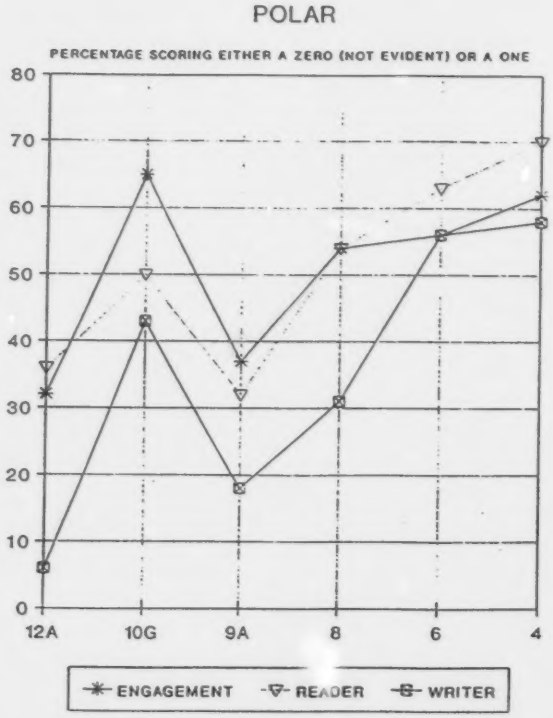
CONSISTENCY and PLOT:

Students' ability at least to sustain the world chosen is high in all grades: a score of 2 or 3 was obtained by more than 60% of Grade 4, 70% of Grade 6, and over 80% for all other groups.


POLAR
MEANS FOR CONSISTENCY, PLOT, AND CHARACTER CREATION (SCALE 0-3)
3
2.5
2
1.5
1
0.5
0
12A
10G
9A
8
6
4
CONSISTENCY
PLOT
CHARACTER


POLAR
PERCENTAGE SCORING EITHER A ZERO (NOT EVIDENT) OR A ONE
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
12A
10G
9A
8
6
4
CONSISTENCY
PLOT
CHARACTER


POLAR
MEANS FOR ENGAGEMENT (with Bear), SENSE OF READER, PERSONALITY OF WRITER (Scale 0-3)
3
2.5
2
1.5
1
0.5
0
12A
10G
9A
8
6
4
ENGAGEMENT
READER
WRITER


POLAR
PERCENTAGE SCORING EITHER A ZERO (NOT EVIDENT) OR A ONE
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
12A
10G
9A
8
6
4
ENGAGEMENT
READER
WRITER

However, for **"Plot"** (coherence, working through to a satisfactory conclusion - somewhat similar to **Focus** in Personal Narrative), the gain between Grades 4 and 6 is quite striking - evidently a stage of writing maturation is moved through here with improvement in the ability to manage various elements of the story. It should also be noted that on these two features Grade 10 General students succeed very well - in the same range as 9 and 12 Advanced.

CONCLUSION:

It is much more difficult for fantasy to claim "stages" in writing maturation than it was for narrative. The reason for the problem appears to lie with the initial choice of worlds. Where students choose the "real world", characterization of the bear will be minimal as will engagement. Consequently, though the ability to characterize may increase through the grades that increase is hidden by the compounding factor of choice: fewer above Grade 6 chose the imaginary world.

It seems on our evidence that a kind of "maturation reversal" emerges between Grades 6 and 8: few students willing to risk the imaginative (fantastical) enterprise. The "neat" task for the writing program would be to encourage "reversal" of the reversal! And that is what the units we have prepared in this mode seek to do.

EXPLANATORY WRITING

The specific prompt employed in this project was **"How to Shop for a ..."**. In the writing unit series we have prepared, we have illustrated a less specific variation: **"How to Make/Do ..."** again wherein the student is writing as expert to novice. Both were employed successfully in the Northwest Territories assessment at Grade 9, and the descriptive analysis chart applies almost equally well to both.

In the current project, some classes appeared to have been encouraged to write loosely on "how to shop" in general and/or to write a narrative (usually unhappily, without much illustration of important talents) about shopping. These misfires undoubtedly contributed to a dimmer picture from our descriptive analysis than would otherwise have been the case.

CHOICES:

At all grades and levels over half the students chose the wholly expository (explanatory) mode. There was variation by grade/level but not in association with maturation. (The matter of seemingly directed choice noted above appears to have been a factor, unfortunately.) Figures vary from a low of 54% at Grade 8 to a high of 83% for 10 Enriched - the average being around 75%.

Substantial numbers chose a mix, quite appropriate, of explanation with personal narrative subordinated to the explanatory/illustrative purpose: as high as 30% (10A) and 21% (8) and 23% (6) - the others less than 15%.

There was some variation across groups in the apparent purpose: to explain, to entertain, or to entertain while explaining:

PURPOSE (as %)

	12A	10E	10A	10G	9A	9G	9B	9M	8	6
Explain	17	75	90	92	55	86	80	78	52	65
Both	50	25	5	-	40	6	-	6	26	18
Entertain	30	-	-	-	-	3	10	11	13	5
Lacks purpose	-	-	5	8	5	6	10	6	10	13

Some association with maturation or, at least, with security or comfort in writing may be seen in that General and Basic level students at secondary tend to stick rather strictly to the purely explanatory.

FEATURES ON THE 0 - 3 SCALE:

Effectiveness of **Introduction** or contextualization does not appear in the set of descriptive analysis categories, but we felt we were missing a feature of some importance. Hence the Research Officer and I added it and went back through the set to judge that feature.

Reporting here is again chiefly through the graphs which appear in two forms: the average score on the 0 - 3 scale and the percentage obtaining a 0 or 1 (virtual absence) on the 0 - 3 scale. Note that **9M** is a de-streamed Grade 9 class from Toronto.

INTRODUCTION:

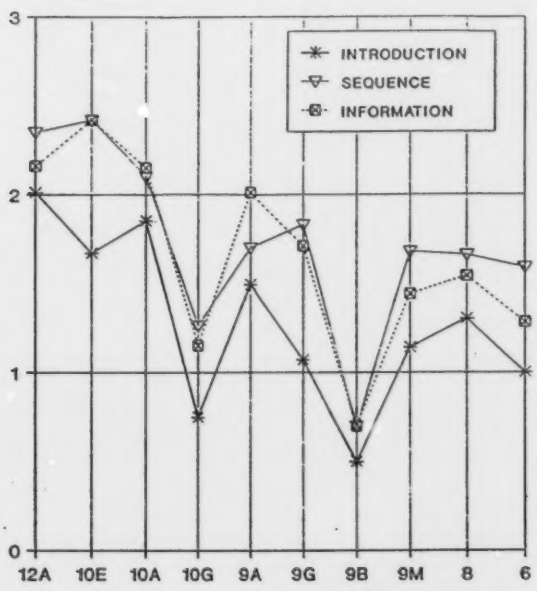
The lack of any engaging introduction was characteristic of much of the writing. Less than 50% of the essays in all grades excepting 12A, 10E, and 10A received a rating of 2 or 3: for 10G, 9M, 9B and Grade 6 - less than 30%. Students tended simply to identify the topic and walk right into the steps (or the story) without engaging the reader's interest in any way or establishing the writer's credentials or interests.

COHERENCE:

All groups, Grades 6 - 12, contained a majority of essays that obtained a 2 or a 3: over 80% for 12A, 10E, 10A, 9A, 9G and 9M. Fundamentally they stayed on topic if not wholly on target, and there is little to note here about "stages" of maturation. Rather, the evidence suggests that by Grade 6 most students are capable of writing a coherent explanation.

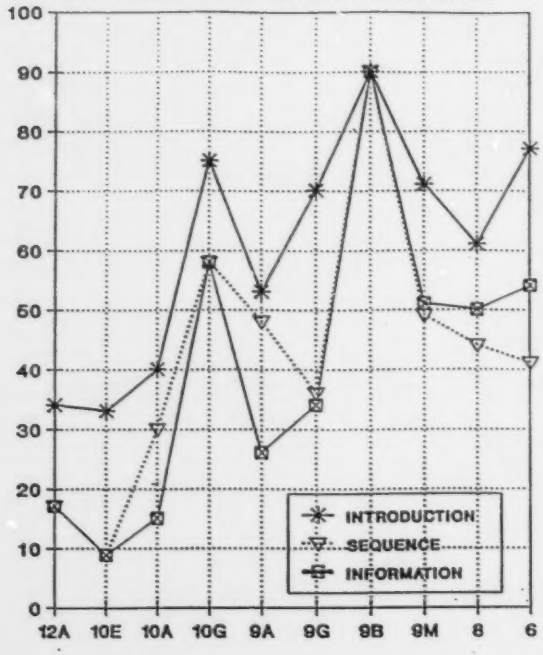
HOW TO SHOP

MEANS:



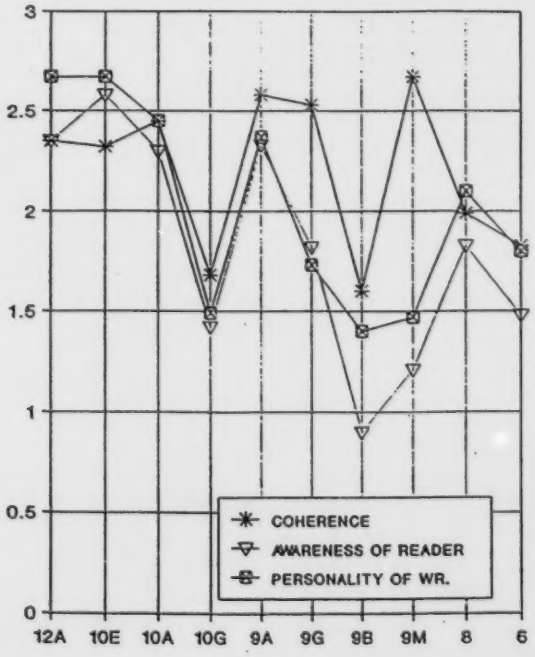
HOW TO SHOP

PER CENT RATED ZERO (NO EVIDENCE OF FEATURE) OR ONE:



HOW TO SHOP

MEANS:



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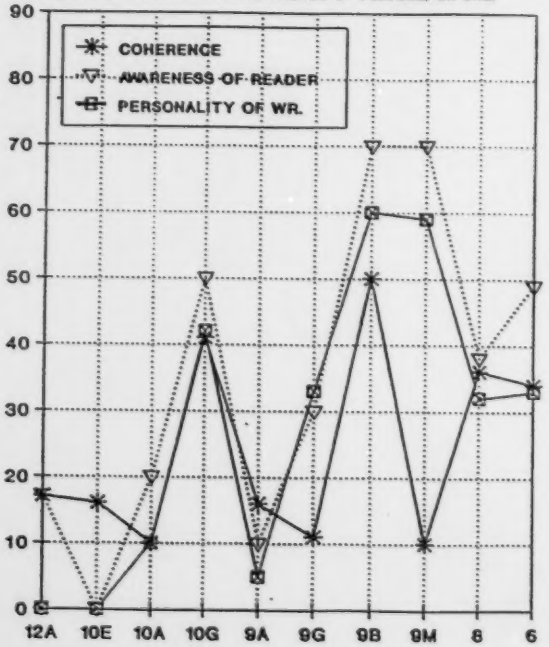

SEQUENCE and INFORMATION:

The ability to set out the explanation in an appropriately ordered manner (topically or by steps) is usually essential to explanation: the reader as novice must be able to follow the steps in sequence. Excepting 9B and 10G, over half the essays in each grade/level received either a 2 or 3 here. However only 12A, 10E, and 10A exceeded 70%. No significant gain is evident from Grade 6 to 8 or any change between Grade 8 and 9 Advanced.

When the writer as expert is describing a process for the presumed novice, sufficiency of information is also important. The pattern for this feature is rather similar to that for **Sequence**.

Over 80% of the essays from 12A, 10E, and 10A were rated at a 2 or a 3 on this feature. 10G, 9B, 9M, and Grade 6: less than 50% received a 2 or a 3, but in all but 9B more than 40% obtained a 2 or a 3.

Performance on the whole then was a little thinner than that for **Sequence**. However, there was a striking gain between Grade 8 (at exactly 50% with a 2 or 3) and 9 Advanced (above 70%).

AWARENESS OF READER and PERSONALITY OF THE WRITER:

As in the other modes reported upon, these features were strongly associated: for 12A, 10E, 10A, and 9A over 80% were judged at a 2 or a 3. For Personality of the Writer, figures were over 90% for these grades and levels!

For both we find a considerable gap, more pronounced for the second feature, between these academic groups and all the other grades, and not a great deal of difference between grades 6 and 8.

For writing of this kind the expertise and enthusiasm of the writer needs to come through as does his/her sense of the reader's needs. The reader, further needs encouragement rather than intimidation.

Strategies that reveal the writer's personality and that take the reader into account seem well developed in most academic stream writers above Grade 8, and it would seem salutary to give greater emphasis to them in Grades 6 and 8. A good many students there have the knack, so such strategies ought to be "in range" of most.

CONCLUSION:

Stages of maturation do not seem as pronounced in this mode as they did for narrative. Most aspects of the task seem well within the ability of many writers by Grade 6; the challenge is largely to encourage more students at Grades 6 - 8 to employ those strategies that would improve their writing along these dimensions.

For all grades and levels the thinnest feature seems to be adequacy of the introduction, though we do find improvement in Grade 10 Advanced over Grade 9 Advanced.

POINT OF VIEW

As noted in **Part I**, our sample beyond Grades 6 and 8 is, unfortunately, too small for any firm conclusions or elaborate claims. As well, in some classes teachers seem to have directed the very open prompt into narrow "for" or "against" channels, contrary to our hope.

As a consequence we did not pursue descriptive analysis with the same rigour as we did for the other modes, and present our findings informally as perhaps providing a few insights for further pursuit.

We did not solicit argument, but rather reflection around an issue, the assumption being that most issues of concern are complex. We hoped students would explore; tentative rather than firm conclusions were welcome. In making that choice, we followed, as described in our report, the advice particularly of John Dixon and Leslie Stratta in their study of teen-age writing, **"Teaching and Assessing Argument"** (Discussion Booklet #2, Southern Regional Examinations Board, Southampton, 1982).

A key word in Stratta and Dixon use is "ruminative" - writing that encourages thinking and exhibits tentativeness with examination of more than one perspective.

Perhaps it should also be stressed that any topic selected should be within the writer's experience range: not major issues such as "pollution", "nuclear weapons", or "the future of Canada".

Highlights from our limited findings:

FOCUS: Judged effective in over 80% of the writing above Grade 9, and effective in 60-80% of Grade 8.

PROVISION OF CONTEXT: Very weakly evident in Grades 6 and 9 General; effective in 40-60% of Grade 7, 60-80% of Grade 8, and over 80% in grades above 9. That is - a reasonable expectation for writers Grade 7 and up, and seemingly an index of maturation.

EMPLOYMENT OF EFFECTIVE ILLUSTRATION:

Very weak in Grades 6, 7 and 9 General, effective in about half the Grade 8 and 10 Enriched essays, strong in Grades 11A and 12G. (Students at Grades 6 and 7 wrote quite short essays - little elaboration, illustration.)

REASONING: A further aspect of elaboration, the pattern found being similar to **Illustration**. (A factor in weak performance at the lower grades was the student's choice of topic as variations on "Why My Parents Should Let Me

Stay Up Late" - producing harangue.) **Reasoning** was judged effective in over 80% of the writing at Grades 11 and 12.

TONE: Again the problem of harangue or very one-sided opinion contributed to depression of performance in lower grades. Only in Grade 12 did a high percentage of the essays reflect a moderate tone, inviting to a reader. Between 40 and 60% of the essays at Grades 8 and 10 Enriched were judged successful here.

OUTCOME: Students, at least in the prompt as we supplied it, were asked to set out suggestions for amelioration or action with respect to the issue of concern. Such "outcomes" were largely absent from Grade 6 and 7, but evident in between 60 and 80% of the larger Grade 8 sample. Over 60% of 10 Enriched and over 80% of Grade 11 and 12 writers achieved **outcome** or **resolution**.

COHERENCE: Between 40 and 60% of Grade 7 and 8 and over 60% of Grade 6 (very short) essays achieved a satisfactory performance here. Less than 40% of our small number of Grade 9 General did well. **Coherence** was achieved by most Grade 10, 11 and 12 students.

It may be observed that on most of these features 12 General performed as well as 11 Advanced - some indication that "maturation" as reflected by age is a contributor.

CONCLUSION

From our findings, and employing exclusively the students' own writing supplemented occasionally with writing from Grades 6 and 9 in the Northwest Territories gathered under similar conditions, we have developed sets of units related to many of the maturation stages found in student writing across Grades 4-12: a "Junior" (Grades 4-6 or 6-9) and a "Senior" (Grades 6-10 or 9-12) series for each mode. Additionally we have developed, from Narrative, three general purpose units for The Sentence, Grammar (the Verb), and Spelling. These are to be matched selectively by the teacher to the present needs of students as reflected in the over-all patterns evident in our study.

Though the study is almost wholly confined to student writers in Eastern Ontario we think the patterns would largely be replicated in other settings. Whether they match exactly or not for grade level, the trends, we would claim, would stand up and the resources, employed judiciously, will benefit students.

The procedures employed in descriptive analysis we believe to be an important strategy for descriptive assessment of writing.

PART III

THE STUDY OF ERROR FREQUENCY

For our study of error frequency, we confined ourselves to Personal Narrative Grades 4-10. This included Advanced, General and Basic streams at Grade 9 and Enriched (or "gifted"), Advanced, and General at Grade 10.

Altogether across four systems 1876 students wrote personal narrative. In the descriptive analysis we examined 312 of the stories (a 17% sample); for the error counts we drew altogether 165 of these, as reported in the following table which reports also average length. The "N's" in the following reports and tables are those in column two unless otherwise specified.

SAMPLE AND AVERAGE LENGTH

	# WRITING	ESSAYS	AVE. LENGTH	STD. DEVIATION
10 Enriched	28	9 (of 9)	741	305
10 Advanced	125	19 (of 33)	344	164
10 General	100	23 (of 26)	280	181
9 Advanced	249	20 (of 29)	294	91
9 General	129	19 (of 30)	257	130
9 Basic	12	12 (of 12)	262	73
8	671	20 (of 78)	384	140
6	241	22 (of 49)	233	104
4	321	21 (of 45)	149	65

Where the number of essays employed in the descriptive analysis considerably exceeded twenty, a random subsample of about 20 essays was drawn; otherwise the complete set was used. The original sample for the descriptive analysis drawn from the four participating systems was based on the distribution of holistic scenes obtained in the system's scoring: i.e. a random sample stratified by score.

Two points concerning length may be noted: the fallback that occurs in Grade 9 against 8 (consistent with other evidence at times of a temporary regress at Grade 9) and, as the large standard deviations would suggest, wide variation in story length at almost all grades. In Grade 6, for example, the shortest story was ca. 90 words and the longest ca. 480.

A word count for length was necessary in order to report **error frequency** and all subsequent reporting is **average frequency per hundred words.**

The general error categories under study are **sentence**, **grammar**, and **spelling**. We made an informal study of use of **paragraphs** as well.

In to-day's climate many teachers of English and Language Arts are critical of analyses such as the present one - as reductionist, as limiting writing to "skills", as undermining holism in language learning. At the same time many publics perceive teachers as inattentive to "skills" which these publics perceive as somehow basic, whether out of their school experience or because misfires are readily observable.

Whichever side of the debate about writing one may happen to be on, there are important practical advantages in taking some measure of the situation from the "error" perspective:

(1) THE POLITICAL:

What in general is really the case concerning students' control of the mechanics of writing?

(2) INSIGHTS CONCERNING DEVELOPMENT:

Are there in fact trends (one would hope positive ones) over-all in writing development with respect to control? What are these? What are the pedagogical implications?

(3) PROGRAM DESIGN AT THE GRADE/LEVEL:

One may make judgements, at least tentative ones, about where the focus might best be at different grades and levels.

(4) ESTABLISHMENT OF REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS:

One may, with respect to control of mechanics and paragraphing, as well as to other "positive features" of maturation, determine reasonable standards of performance ("benchmarks", if you like) for particular grades and levels.

The importance of such a study will be evident in a number of the results obtained here. There are some surprises, or surprises at least to those publics that claim the basics are in decline, students can't write, a sentence, etc. At the least what we have achieved here is a description of performance approximating the real situation, something that the main complainants about writing skills have not done.

The study reveals that in some areas there is indeed a "natural" change or improvement over time where early intervention for most students would be wasteful of teaching time and energy. It reveals further that problems of a severe order tend to be concentrated in the writing of relatively few students - generalizations often most seriously misrepresent.

An outcome, with reference to (3) and (4) above as it pertains to the writing maturation project has been design of a unit on **paragraphing** integrated with **organization** in the **Personal Narrative** set of units for the writing program and three unit series for general employment pertinent to particular discoveries out of the error counts: specifically **fused/comma-fault** problems from the study of **sentence** errors; **verb tense sequence**, with special attention to the ESL student, from the study of **grammar** errors; and problems of **homophone confusion** (as piece/peace) and **word splits** (everyone/every one) from the study of **spelling** errors.

PARAGRAPHING

This study was quite informal. Principally we were interested to know the extent to which students appeared to have in their repertoire the strategy of so organizing the story. For our count, very short stories which were written in such a manner that a paragraph division would have made little sense anyhow and stories developed chiefly through dialogue were omitted.

For the remainder, the percentages employing no paragraph or only one paragraph division were as follows ("N" in parenthesis):

ONE OR NO PARAGRAPH DIVISION
(Per Cent)

Grade	10E	(9) - **11**	Grade	9A	(19) - **47**	Grade	8	(20) - **30**
	10A	(19) - **26**		9G	(18) - **44**		6	(21) - **38**
	10G	(22) - **64**		9B	(12) - **75**		4	(17) - **82**

Note again here the apparently stronger performance of Grade 8 writers over Grade 9 in all streams.

As "paragraph use" was examined, we also made an informal judgement of the general purposefulness/effectiveness of paragraph divisions. The percentages judged effective or moderately effective were as follows:

10E - **89**	9A - **63**	8 - **70**
10A - **84**	9G - **56**	6 - **62**
10G - **36**	9B - **25**	4 - **24**

OBSERVATIONS:

While it may certainly not be claimed that failure to paragraph or the barest attention to paragraphing is any absolute indicator of immaturity in writing (the writer may develop a sophisticated essay or story, soundly organized, but keep the "courtesy" divisions in his/her head, as it were), the patterns evident here do suggest an association between maturation and the division of the story or essay into paragraphs.

A high percentage of younger writers (Grade 4) seem not to have the strategy in their repertoire; by Grade 6 one finds a dramatic improvement: about 75-80% at Grade 4 use the strategy poorly, if at all; this declines to 30-35% at Grade 6.

Both the 9 Basic level and the 10 General level fare poorly here also - not very much better than Grade 4. Hence paragraphing as an "index" of sorts of maturation is clearly not a matter of age - more likely of a more generic writing/thinking ability, perhaps, too, of a sensitivity to the reader's needs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WRITING PROGRAM:

1. If employment of the strategy seems largely "naturally" to develop ca. Grade 5, this seems the most reasonable point to begin to press its importance on students (rather than at Grade 4).

2. It seems that the strategy ought to receive special reinforcement across Grade 9, and certainly be given considerable emphasis in General and Basic at Grades 9 and 10.

3. Proposed "expectations":

Grade 6:	That students employ the strategy
Grade 8:	That students employ the strategy effectively.
Grade 9:	*What does one say here in view of the data?*
Grade 10:	That by this point Advanced level students exhibit mastery, and General & Basic exhibit use and reasonable control.

CATEGORIES OF ERROR

Capitalization, minor punctuation, punctuation of dialogue, and spelling of proper nouns are not included, nor are errors in use of the apostrophe excepting homophonic confusions of the **you're, they're, it's** type under **spelling.**

SENTENCE:

1. The **NO SENTENCE ERROR**

2. The **FUSED SENTENCE** — Subdivided into "sentences" run together with no punctuation, and the **"COMMA FAULT"**, "sentences" divided by only a comma. No coordinate conjunction.

3. The **RUN-ON SENTENCE** — Ideas loosely tagged together with "and's" and "but's" (normally having at least 3 principal clauses very weakly associated or not associated).

4. **"OTHER"**: Serious breakdown in parallelism, dangling participial constructions, etc.

GRAMMAR:

1. **THE VERB**
   - (a) **TENSE**: E.g. Sequence (as slips past/present/past), lack of past perfect when context clearly requires it, conditionals not used where required, or used where inappropriate.
   - (b) **SUBJECT-VERB** agreement

(c) **PRINCIPAL PARTS**: Chiefly the Old English strong ("sing") verbs or transitional verbs ("bring"); occasionally a lost "-ed"; the lie/lay problem. "Of" for "have" (as in "He would of gone") classified here, though arguably it is a homophonic problem (sound of "would've").

2. **THE PRONOUN:** Case, Agreement, seriously ambiguous reference or lack of a reference (Antecedent problems), incorrect use of reflexive (as "John and myself are going.")

Exceptions: "Everyone...their"; "Who" for "whom" in the head position as in "Who did you go with?" Both are, if not standard usage now, close to it.

3. **CONJUNCTION/PREPOSITION:**

Howlers such as "off of" (quite rare), a preposition used as a conjunction (usually this was the substitution of "like" for "as"), non-idiomatic use of prepositions as "He went **in** the house", "He got me **in** trouble."

4. **"OTHER":** Everything else, such as a seriously misplaced modifier, adjective used as adverb, double negative. (Not the split infinitive)

SPELLING:

1. **HOMOPHONES:** words that sound alike or almost alike but with different spellings: e.g. to/too; steel/steal; no/know

2. **"LINK":** words that the student separates when s/he should not or fails to separate when s/he should as "When ever"; "every body" (as "everyone"); "alot" (a chronic problem)

3. **"COMMON"** and 4. **"OTHER"**

The "common" versus "other" division was far from scientific and not especially helpful. It is of more value, it seems, for any consistent general approach to concentrate on the homophone and link problems as we have done in our units. In other spelling "departments" problem words may greatly from student to student, and many of the expected problems as ie/ei turn up quite infrequently (4 instances in over 160 stories). If there is a third general category it is in the use of affixes: when and whether to double a consonant or retain a silent "e" as in "unatural" "arguement" "unfortunatly".

The **wholly fused** (no punctuation) versus the **comma fault** proved to be the most interesting category in reflecting a performance shift across grades. One problem with "comma fault" is that the insertion of only a comma between short, related principal clauses is gaining wider and wider acceptance, even if the acceptance is grudging.

The most debatable category was **conjunction/preposition**: we were likely too harsh on some idiomatic marginal misuses as in "He got me in [rather than into] trouble" and especially in the **"like"** versus **"as"** distinction: "like" as a conjunction may still be considered an error in grammar, but widespread usage has overtaken us, as even the 1990 edition of the **Globe and Mail Style Guide** concedes. Many "errors" were "like" for "as". (See the Table at the end of the report.)

If we have not been severe enough in some error categories, here we have likely been too severe.

By the way, the champion misspelling: **alot** for **a lot** Epidemic!

CAVEATS:

In the following analysis and the tables on which they are based, one is speaking of averages. And it is true that, for the essays examined, the average error frequency per hundred words for sentence errors (Grade 9 Advanced) is 0.36 (i.e. about 1 for every 300 words). There is no "average" essay, however. The number of sentence errors per essay varies from zero (10 essays - one-half) to five, with by essay frequency per hundred as low as zero, obviously, and as high as 1.6. This illustration is perhaps the least extreme. There is a great deal more "wow" in other categories at other levels.

Whatever the grade or level there will be students who exhibit "mastery" - of the sentence, of spelling, of grammar; there will be others where control is precarious or absent. The application, then, of a generalization to the individual student as a prediction of how he or she will perform is often quite inappropriate. It may seem trite, but it is generally true: the needs of the individual writer must be determined from what s/he actually does.

Further, the "average" suggests an association that may be very weak. It is evident as one examines essays, one by one, by category that over the grades there are a few students where "everything" is out of control or poorly managed and others where everything of the mechanical order is under control. It is not, however, true in general that poor spelling is a predictor of poor grammar or poor sentence structure, etc. One may as readily find in a grade level set, and these are examples from Grade 8, a student who has 5 grammar errors and only 1 sentence error or a student with 7 sentence errors and only 1 grammar error as find a student where all categories exhibit control or where all exhibit its lack.

Thirdly, not all "errors" are equal. **"Like"** for **"as"** like in this sentence is certainly not as serious an error as repeated "No sentence" errors. And frequencies are not directly comparable either: an essay may contain 300 words (theoretically 300 opportunities to misspell) and only 20 sentences (the opportunity for error thus declining enormously). On both these counts an average frequency of **.8** for sentence errors signals a considerably more serious problem than a frequency of **1.1** for spelling. (These are the **10 General** means in the present study.) One suspects that most teachers of **10G** would be rather happy with a frequency of 1.1 for spelling, assuming they would (here read "will") believe it.

THE GENERAL FINDINGS

Here, first is the over-all pattern:

ERROR FREQUENCY (per 100 WORDS)

	SENTENCE	SPELLING	GRAMMAR	(VERB as % OF GR.)
10E	.07	.31	.25	35%
10A	.60	.93	.47	42
10G	.79	1.07	.89	49
9A	.36	.68	.54	41
9G	1.10	1.39	.98	46
9B	2.04	3.95	1.21	55
8	.66	1.13	.63	58
6	1.29	2.04**	.92	46
4	1.53*	1.82	.93	28

* Two essays that are a long running sentence not included.

** 3 essays contained 69 of the 155 errors. These have been removed. Were they included the frequency would rise to 3.03.

Except at Grade 4, errors involving the verb account for at least one-third and often about one-half of all grammar errors. The sub-categories of verb error were tense sequence, principal parts, and subject-verb agreement.

THE SENTENCE

In the following table "Fused Total" includes both those sentences where two principal clauses are not separated by a comma ("wholly fused") and those separated by only a comma ("comma fault"). This is followed by the percentage of "wholly fused".

ERROR FREQUENCY AND DISTRIBUTION

THE SENTENCE

	10E	10A	10G	9A	9G	9B	8	6	4
AS % OF TOTAL ERRORS:	12	30	29	23	32	28	27	25	35
TOTAL FREQUENCY/100w:	.07	.60	.79	.36	1.10	2.04	.66	.29	1.53
NO SENTENCE: f	.01	.08	.11	.07	.16	.22	.04	.12	.17
(of all sentence) %	20	13	14	19	15	11	06	09	11
FUSED TOTAL: f	.06	.41	.56	.27	.71	1.43	.55	1.05	1.13
(of all sentence) %	80	69	71	76	65	70	82	82	74
NO PUNC. AS % OF FUSED:	NIL	15	50	19	43	60	38	72	64
RUN-ON: f	NIL	.08	.12	NIL	.18	.32	.05	.06	.20
(of all sentence) %	-	13	16	-	17	16	08	05	13
OTHER: f	NIL	.03	NIL	.02	.04	.06	.03	.06	.03
(of all sentence) %	-	05	-	05	04	03	04	05	02

OBSERVATIONS PERTINENT TO SENTENCE ERRORS:

1. (a) Frequency of error is halved or better at Grade 8 when 4's and 8's are compared.

   (b) At Grade 9 Advanced the number halves again, though Grade 10 Advanced is close to the Grade 8 figure.

   (c) Sentence errors are strikingly more frequent for Basic Level 9's (2 per hundred words or likely one error for every 6 or 7 sentences).

2. The proportion of errors (of the categories selected) that are classified as sentence errors is quite stable across most grades and levels (ca 25-30%). At 10 Enriched the percentage is only 12 (and very few such errors altogether); at Grade 4 about 35%.

3. (a) The number of "No Sentence" errors is very small and, at all grades, constitutes less than 20% of all sentence errors. Students, whether Grade 4 or Grade 10, can write a sentence!

   (b) The proportion of Run-On sentences is also low; less than 20% at all grades and levels; only 5% at Grade 6 and no such errors at all found in Grade 9 Advanced!

   (c) The fused and comma fault error is by far the most prevalent problem in all grades, accounting variously for between 64 and 80% of all sentence errors. This is a remarkably stable characteristic across all grades and levels.

4. **The most striking change across grades and levels is the shifting ratio between the wholly fused (no punctuation) and the "comma fault" sentence.**

   A seeming general signal of increased maturation appears to be a striking decline in the fused sentence error. It heavily outnumbers the comma fault in a ratio of about 2:1 around Grades 4 and 6, and virtually disappears at the Advanced Level in Grades 9 and 10.

A NOTE ON EXTENSIVENESS OF SENTENCE PROBLEMS:

It has already been noted that there is no "average" essay to accommodate the average frequency of error at any grade or level. Individual students may reveal an almost complete lack of control; others, almost total control.

It may be salutary therefore to note the percentage of essays by Grade and Level where control and total lack of control are exhibited. Control is defined here as less than one error and lack of control is defined as "greater than 2 errors", each per hundred words.

SENTENCE CONTROL
%

	N	CONTROL	LACKING CONTROL
10E	9	100	0
10A	19	58	0
10G	23	48	13
9A	20	65	0
9G	19	42	19
9B	12	8	42
8	20	45	5
6	22	23	18
4	21	24	33

That is, the trend to bringing the sentence under reasonable or excellent control is quite pronounced as students advance through the grades, with, however, the poorest managers clustering in the Basic level.

CONCLUSIONS:

As far as the pattern can be consistently traced, the frequency of sentence errors declines as one moves up the grades, with, however, sentence problems remaining a serious matter for the Basic level student at Grade 9 and to a somewhat lesser extent the General level student.

Assumptions that appear to be widely held, that students have difficulty writing a sentence and that students tend to let their sentences ramble on and on are, on the evidence, disproven. These are not, globally at least, serious problems; students can and routinely do produce complete "thought units".

The problem is that many have not "inhaled" the code for written discourse of the end punctuation marks. It is clear as one proceeds up the grades that more and more students recognize the need to signal a pause or break between thoughts, though frequently the comma (less appropriate and usually inappropriate) rather than the period is employed.

This "transition", if you will, from frequent "no punctuation" to frequent comma to replacement by the period seems to be a useful index of maturation in sentence management - the first stage of that transition almost wholly effected by Grade 9 Advanced level students, and very poorly so by many Basic level students.

IMPLICATIONS:

1. The emphasis in past and perhaps some current writing programs on the "No sentence" and the "run-on sentence" error seems evidently misplaced.

2. A fairly high frequency of comma-fault and fused sentences may be expected in the Junior (Grade 4-6) division, with a fairly dramatic decline in the latter by Grade 8.

   This may well be part of a "natural" transition to the conventions of written discourse, one that should be encouraged strongly. (This might be achieved in part by having students with the problem read their own work aloud and note the natural "break" points.)

3. It would seem reasonable to set as an expectation for the writer at Grade 8 the elimination of the fused sentence. The comma fault may take longer to eradicate. Anyhow, as noted earlier, we find increased tolerance for the comma between brief, related principal clauses.

SPELLING

Spelling errors, understandably, account for the largest percentage of the three classifications at all grades and levels - between 40 and 55% of all errors.

Their frequency by grade and level patterns almost exactly that for sentence errors excepting a slight increase rather than a slight decrease from Gr. 4 - 6. The difference would appear to non-significant both statistically and practically. Average frequency approximately halves as we contrast Grades 4 - 6 with 8 - 9 Adv.

ERROR FREQUENCY AND DISTRIBUTION

	10E	10A	10G	9A	9G	9B	8	6	4
AS % OF ALL ERRORS:	49	47	39	43	40	55	47	46*	43
TOTAL FREQUENCY/100w:	.31	.93	1.07	.68	1.39	3.95	1.13	2.04*	1.82
HOMOPHONES: f	.10	.17	.22	.15	.25	.57	.20	.49	.10
(of all spelling) %	33	18	19	22	18	15	17	16	05
"LINK": f	.07	.12	.20	.12	.25	.32	.17	.37	.38
(of all spelling) %	24	13	18	18	18	08	15	12	21
"COMMON": f	.06	.35	.36	.26	.49	1.66	.29	1.58	.80
(of all spelling) %	19	38	32	38	35	43	25	52	44
OTHER: f	.07	.29	.36	.15	.41	1.40	.48	.59	.54
(of all spelling) %	24	31	32	22	29	35	43	19	29

* Deleting the 3 essays that accounted for 45% of the errors found in all 22 essays. Spelling would account for 58% of all errors were these three essays included.

OBSERVATIONS:

1. Excepting 9 Basic (at 23%), "Homophones" and "Link" errors account for over, at some grades/levels well over, a quarter of all spelling errors.

2. Excepting 9B and Grade 4, the contribution of these two error-types, percentagewise, is about equal. (Grade 4's have a more severe problem with link words; 9 Basic with homophones.)

3. Excepting 10E (where both the number of essays and the total number of errors found were small) and Grade 8, errors in words from common vocabulary capture a large percentage of the "error market": between 32 and 52 per cent.

A NOTE ON THE EXTENSIVENESS OF SPELLING PROBLEMS:

"Spelling control" here is defined as less than 1 error per hundred words; "out of control" as greater than 3 errors per hundred words.

SPELLING CONTROL

%

	N	CONTROL	"OUT OF CONTROL"
10E	9	100	0
10A	19	63	5
10G	23	43	4
9A	20	75	0
9G	19	37	21
9B	12	0	58
8	20	40	5
6	22	32	50 (enormous variability)
4	21	38	14

Grade 6 provides a dramatic contrast between spellers and non-spellers. The contrast largely disappears in Grade 8.

CONCLUSIONS:

There appear to be two quite specific targets that may be attacked on a general front: "link words" (everyone/every one) and homophones. They contribute considerably to the error total and remain a chronic problem through Grade 10. As they show no "inclination" to disappear, perhaps they should be attacked early rather than late.

Our "common" and "other" classification was not very helpful; the distinction was rather fuzzy in the first place. The principal general problem beyond the specific problems already identified appeared to be spelling modifications when prefix or suffix is added to the root. This may make a suitable general target of occasional attention.

RELATED PEDAGOGICAL SUGGESTIONS:

The advent of wordprocessing programs with spell-checkers may influence our future approach to spelling, and we perhaps need to reflect on the implications of new technologies just as mathematics teachers have sought to incorporate the computer and the electronic calculator.

1. It does seem worthwhile, perhaps especially since technology cannot help here, to focus at a quite early stage (Grade 5-6) on homophone problems.

2. The word-split problem perhaps should also be addressed starting at Grade 4 where it is already prevalent. "Alot" is its own special case, but many other misfires are a matter of the ear and emphasis. They could be encountered with humour in an oral context:

   > Someone was throwing paper airplanes, so the teacher demanded to see <u>every</u> <u>one</u> of us after school, and <u>everyone</u> is going to show up.

   Students could even write a little play employing (both ways) link and unlinked pairs!

3. Through word study and the building up from roots with different affixes as "un-", "-ly", "-ess", "-ing" there may be some induction of rules for consonant doubling and dropping of the final "-e". (Good luck with "-ance" and "-ence"!)
   This, from time to time.

4. The common practice of having students keep track of their <u>own</u> demons seems sensible.

GRAMMAR

The table of grammar errors and their subclassifications appears on the page following.

The percentage of errors classified as grammar varies greatly across grades and levels - from only 17% at 9 Basic (overwhelmed by spelling) up to 40% at 10 Enriched.

Frequency per hundred words is constant at Grades 4 and 6 (**.9**) declining by a third at Grade 8 and exhibiting only slight further decline at Grade 9 Advanced. For only 9 Basic at **1.2** does the frequency exceed one error per hundred words.

It should also be recalled that grammar errors were stretched to include inappropriate prepositional use (really a matter of diction or idiom); consequently, frequencies, if grammar is considered strictly, are slightly inflated. And "like" for "as" (20 instances) accounted for 29% of all conjunction/preposition errors!

ERROR FREQUENCY AND DISTRIBUTION

GRAMMAR

	10E	10A	10G	9A	9G	9B	8	6	4
GRAMMAR AS % OF ALL ERRORS:	40	24	32	34	28	17	26	18	22
VERB: TOTAL FREQUENCY/100w:	.09	.20	.43	.22	.45	.67	.37	.43	.26
AS % OF ALL GRAMMAR:	36	42	49	41	47	55	59	47	28
TENSE: f	.04	.09	.20	.14	.27	.35	.22	.18	.22
(of all VERB) %	50	46	46	62	59	52	61	41	88
SUBJ-VERB: f	NIL	.03	.05	NIL	.08	NIL	.03	.06	.03
(of all VERB) %	-	15	11	-	18	-	07	14	12
PRINCIPAL PARTS: f	.04	.08	.19	.09	.10	.32	.12	.20	NIL
(of all VERB) %	50	38	43	38	23	48	32	45	-
GRAMMAR EXCEPT VERB f/100W:	.16	.28	.45	.32	.53	.54	.26	.49	.67
PRONOUN: f	.04	.09	.02	.05	.20	.32	.09	.14	.32
(of all Gr. exc. Vb) %	25	32	04	16	38	59	35	29	48
CONJUNC/PREPOS. f	.09	.11	.31	.22	.18	.06	.09	.18	.32
(of all Gr. exc. Vb) %	56	39	69	69	34	11	35	37	48
"OTHER": f	.03	.08	.12	.05	.14	.16	.08	.18	.03
(of all Gr. exc. Vb) %	19	29	27	16	26	30	31	37	04

The collective picture: Frequencies close to **one** at Grade 4, 6, 9 General, and 10 General and slightly above at 9 Basic. Frequencies closer to **.5** (about one error for every 200 words) at Grades 8, 9 Advanced and 10 Advanced; **one** in 400 words at 10 Enriched.

ERRORS BY CLASSIFICATION:

A basic division was made between errors involving the verb and all other grammar errors. The former accounted for anywhere between 28% (Grade 4) and 58% (Grade 8) of the grammar errors, the percentage exceeding 40 for all but 10 Enriched and Grade 4.

The Verb:

1. Errors in subject-verb agreement were rare, at no grade or level exceeding an average frequency of **.08**. No such errors were found at all in 9 Basic, 9 Advanced or 10 Enriched.

2. Errors in tense and tense sequence across all grades and levels accounted for **25%** of all grammar errors (give or take 5%).

3. Errors in principal parts of the irregular verbs, excepting Grade 4 where (oddly) none were found, ran at about **20%** of all grammar errors for most grades/streams.

The Pronoun:

Here one finds considerable variation (and no pattern) as a percentage of grammar errors: almost no such errors at 10 General, but about 20% at 9A for example. The problem was usually of case: the objective form ("Me and my buddies were") as subject.

Conjunction/Preposition:

Partly because of the frequency of the "like/as" problem and partly because of my expansion of the category to include idiomatic misuse of the preposition, this category carves out a substantial percentage (variously between 10 and 30%) at all grades and levels except 9B where pronoun errors supervene. Again there is no seeming cross-grade pattern or trend.

"Other" Grammar: Adjectives as adverbs, misplaced modifiers, etc.

Their contribution to the total error count (excepting Grade 4 where such errors were very infrequent) ran at about 10-20% quite consistently across grades and levels.

A NOTE ON THE EXTENSIVENESS OF GRAMMAR PROBLEMS:

Grammatical control is defined here as less than one error per hundred words, and its lack as greater than two. If these definitions are perceived as generous (which they may be) as well as arbitrary (which they are), recall that within "grammar" is included idiomatic misuse of prepositions.

GRAMMATICAL CONTROL

%

	N	CONTROL	LACKING CONTROL
10E	9	100	0
10A	19	89	0
10G	23	61	4
9A	20	80	0
9G	19	42	11
9B	12	58	17
8	20	80	5
6	22	68	18
4	21	62	10

It will be evident when these data are compared with "SENTENCE" and "SPELLING" that very few students at all (any grade or level) could be characterized as revealing serious difficulties here. In general, grammatical control is not an issue in this writing in this mode at any grade or level either collectively or, to any great extent, for individual students.

CONCLUSIONS:

The perception so widely held that students generally cannot write grammatically is under-cut by these findings. "Tense" or "tense sequence" makes up a large percentage of the verb errors, though even here frequency is low. (It has been observed in studies of writing in the Northwest Territories and in a study, paralleling the present one, of writing in English in a French language secondary school, that tense signals - particularly the dental "**-ed**" ending - are a special problem for ESL writers.) Subject-verb agreement is clearly not a problem of any scope.

The principal problems that did emerge were

(1) tense as noted above (shifts)
(2) additional conditionals "If he would have ..., he would have"
(3) principal parts of irregular verbs
(4) the use of objective case as subject (pronouns)
(5) "like" for "as"

the last reflecting a shift in practice. The "error" is rapidly becoming accepted usage.

The low incidence of most traditional categories of error led us to design for grammar only one general purpose unit: **tense and tense sequence** with special attention to the problems of the ESL student.

A BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY

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In my judgement the definitive work on holistic scoring.

P. B. Diederich: **Measuring Growth in English**, National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, 1974.

Especially valuable on analytic scoring.

John Dixon & Leslie Stratta: **Writing Narrative - and Beyond**, Canadian Council of Teachers of English, Ottawa, 1986.

This is an expansion of Dixon and Stratta's observations on writing and writing assessment for the Southern Regional Examinations Board in the U.K. Both were involved in writing observations, in pamphlet form (for SREB and the Schools Council), during the early 1980's across a wide range of writing modes including "Argument" (Point of View), Explanation, Fantasy, and Personal Narrative. See especially Teaching and Assessing Argument, SREB, 1982.

P. Evans, P. Brown, M. Marsh: **Criteria for the Evaluation of Student Writing, Grades 7 & 8: A Handbook**, OISE Press, Toronto, 1977.

Criteria for analytic scoring developed by teachers in association with the OISE Writing Evaluation Project.

P. Evans: **The Evaluation of Writing: Grades 8, 12 and 13**, Review and Evaluation Bulletin, Vol. 1, #2, Ministry of Education - Ontario, 1979.

Application of analytic scoring, measures of syntactic maturity, and error frequency in a study of Grade 12 writing in the Interface study (see Traub et al. below) and Grade 8 in the OISE Writing Evaluation Project.

P. Evans and M. Holmes: **The Ontario Test of English Achievement: The Final Report on Its Development**, Council of Ontario Universities, Toronto, 1982.

P. Evans: **Northwest Territories Assessments Grades 6 and 9**, 1985 - 1991. Each final report is available from Northwest Territories Education in Yellowknife.

(A) ANNUAL REPORTS

Grade 9 in 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988; Grade 6 in 1989; Grade 9 in 1991 (with a comparison with 1986 performance). In most years a report on analytic scoring appears. First experiments with descriptive analysis occurred in 1985 - refined by 1987.

(B) TEACHER RESOURCES:

(i) **Writing - the Junior High Years: Teacher Guide**, NWT Education, 1988. Includes a study of patterns, applications of analytic scoring, introduction to descriptive analysis (labelled here still as "primary trait").

(ii) A series of units for the writing program (like the series developed in the present project). Still "in press".

Richard Lloyd-Jones: "Primary Trait Scoring", pp. 33-68 in C. R. Cooper & L. Odell: **Evaluating Writing - Describing, Measuring, Judging**, National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, 1977.

The key essay on primary trait scoring as employed in the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

L. D. McLean: **Report of the 1981** [Ontario Assessment Instrument Pool] **Field Trials in English & Mathematics - Intermediate Division**, Ministry of Education - Ontario, 1982.

Includes reporting of holistic scoring and error counts of 7-10 writing across Ontario. "Trouble always starts ..." and "How to shop ..." were employed.

R. Traub, R. Wolfe, C. Wolfe, P. Evans, H. H. Russell: **Nature of Students** (2 Volumes) - Report #2 of the Secondary - Postsecondary **Interface** Study, Ministries of Education and of Colleges and Universities - Ontario, 1976.

The detailed study of writing performance at Grades 12 and 13 appears in the second volume.

APPENDICES

1. **The Writing Prompts**
2. **The Forms for Descriptive Analysis**

TROUBLE ALWAYS STARTS WHEN ... IS AROUND

Write a story about a personal experience, something that happened to you because of a person who, for some reason or other, always brings trouble with him/her. That person could be a friend, a classroom pest, an older or younger brother or sister, or it could be you: "Trouble always starts when I am around."

In your story reveal the character of the person and describe a particular occasion when that person caused trouble. Describe the effects of the trouble s/he caused. Humour is most welcome, and your own character should come through, too. The story may really have happened, or it may be partly or wholly imaginary, but make it seem real.

An Issue of Concern

In this composition you are to develop your point of view about a topic of concern to you as a young person. The choice of topic is up to you.

It should be an issue that interests you and that you know something about: it may be an issue or problem quite personal to you or other young people, or an issue or problem of more general concern within the school or community.

Explain the problem or issue, providing some illustration, and drawing, if possible, on personal experience. Suggest some means of improving the situation.

POLAR BEAR IN THE SHOWER

Imagine that you have just come into your bathroom and discovered a polar bear taking a shower or a bath.
Write a story telling what happens next. Begin at the point where you discover the bear.

How to shop for a ...

If a buyer went to the first car lot he saw, and, after reading a brief sales pitch, bought the first car the salesperson pushed at him, we would think the buyer was pretty foolish. And so would the salesperson.

Though you probably haven't bought a car lately, you likely know quite a bit about how to shop carefully for something: perhaps a bicycle, a motorbike, clothes, a clock radio, a Walkman, or skis. Even if you aren't an expert on a particular product, you can suggest some rules for careful shopping.

Imagine, then, you have a friend who doesn't know much about a particular product or about good shopping habits. You do, and want to help him/her shop wisely. Write a composition explaining what to look for in the product and how to go about shopping for it.

Your composition should be informal in style. A funny incident from personal experience might be a valuable way to illustrate your point in an interesting way.

To the teacher: Do encourage specificity. Remind the student s/he is an expert and that evidence of the writer's character and enthusiasm make for interesting reading.

CATEGORIES AND SCALES FOR DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Mode: Narrative: "TROUBLE ALWAYS STARTS.."

CHOICES (Circle choice)

Troublemaker: – self – other person – animal or pet – none established

Narrator: The story is narrated in the first person: – Yes – No – Partially

Fiction/Fantasy: (circle choice)

– wholly fantasy – wholly fictional – true, but exaggerated – apparently true

STRUCTURE

Setting: The writer provides a setting/context to orientate the reader. (circle choice)

– Yes – Minimal – No

Focus:

– The writer focuses and elaborates principal event	3
– The writer focuses on an event but gives insufficient detail	2
– The writer gives a string of events	1
– The writer does not focus on any pertinent event	0

Ending: The writer supplies a satisfactory ending. (circle choice)

– Yes – To some extent – No

STRATEGIES OF WRITING

Humour: (circle choice)

– not used – touches of humour
– an important feature – considerable use

If humour is employed it is:

– imaginatively employed with appropriate constraint	3
– fairly effective	2
– too forced, exaggerated	1
– ineffective	0

Suspense: The writer introduces an element of suspense in the story. Y N

Dialogue: Dialogue has significant use in story development. Y N

If dialogue is used the writer:
- shows reasonable mastery of conventions 3
- uses conventions reasonably consistently 2
- uses some signals, but inconsistently 1
- shows no understanding of the conventions 0

Characterization of troublemaker:

- engaging, detailed 3
- clear, some illustration 2
- minimal 1
- no characterization 0

READER/WRITER

Awareness of reader:

- the writer depicts events clearly, is engaging and evokes empathy in the reader 3
- the writer shows some awareness of the reader 2
- the reader receives little attention from the writer 1
- the writer is oblivious of the reader 0

Personality of the writer:

- the writer's personality comes through clearly 3
- the reader can partially detect the writer's personality 2
- a few glimpses of the writer can be seen 1
- there is little hint of the writer's personality 0

CATEGORIES AND SCALES FOR DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Mode: Fantasy. "POLAR BEAR..."

CHOICES (circle appropriate phrase)
"World"
- the writer enters an imaginary world
- the writer treats the bear as an object in the "real" world
- no "world" is established

Exit from imaginary world, (where applicable)
- only a "dream"
- leaves us wondering
- ineffective

STRUCTURE
Setting: The writer provides a setting/context to orientate the reader Yes Minimal N

Consistency: (whichever the choice of world, imaginary or real)
- imaginatively sustained 3
- largely sustained, with few inconsistencies 2
- partly sustained, but with many inconsistencies 1
- confused 0

Plot:
- story is a coherent whole 3
- story worked through to a satisfactory conclusion 2
- some signs of a plot, but inconclusive or inconsistent 1
- little sense of plot 0

USE OF STRATEGIES
Use of Humour: (circle choice)
- employed throughout
- considerable use
- touches of humour
- not used

If Humour is employed it is:
- imaginatively employed with appropriate constraint 3
- fairly effective 2
- too forced, exaggerated 1
- ineffective 0

Suspense: the writer uses an element of suspense in the story Y N

Character creation:
- effective characterization of bear, narrator and others (if applicable) 3
- good characterization of bear and narrator 2
- some characterization of bear or narrator 1
- little characterization of bear or narrator 0

Engagement (narrator and bear)
- imaginatively sustained 3
- consistently sustained 2
- some, but not well sustained 1
- none 0

Is dialogue used to sustain the engagement? Y N

Other features noted:

READER/WRITER
Sense of reader:
- satisfactory involvement with the reader 3
- occasional attempts to involve the reader 2
- some slight indication 1
- no indication 0

Personality of the writer:
- the writer reveals himself engagingly and is responsive to the events 3
- the writer reveals his character 2
- a few hints 1
- little sign 0

CATEGORIES AND SCALES FOR DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Mode: Informative. "HOW TO SHOP..."

CHOICES (circle your choice)

Purpose:

•explain entertain •both •lacks purpose

Treatment:

•chiefly expository •mixture of exposition and narrative

•chiefly narrative, but relevant •wholly narrative and irrelevant

STRUCTURE

Sequence:

•there is a sequence of clearly defined steps in a logical order	3
•most steps evident but not clearly signalled	2
•an attempt to give steps, but sequence not clear	1
•little evidence of steps	0

Information:

•the writer includes all pertinent information	3
•some information lacks details	2
•much information is incomplete	1
•the information is insufficient to be of any use	0

Coherence:

•the writer remains on topic, and does not digress	3
•the writer adds some irrelevancies, but on the whole, subordinates to task	2
•many irrelevant facts distract the reader	1
•much irrelevant material leads to incoherence	0

READER/WRITER

Awareness of reader (as a non-specialist):

(the writer is aware of possible problems the reader may have and takes care to inform, advise, remind and warn the reader of things to do (or not do); as well, s/he may offer encouragement.)

GOAL: WELL-ACHIEVED PARTIALLY LIMITED ACHIEVEMENT NONE

Personality of the writer:

•the writer's personality comes through as confident, enthusiastic and engaging	3
•the reader can detect the writer's personality	2
•few glimpses of the writer can be seen	1
•there is no sign of the writer's personality	0

CATEGORIES AND SCALES FOR DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Mode: Expository. **"Point of View--An Issue of Concern"**

1. Issue of concern selected:

2. Which of the following best describe the composition: (circle choice)

•General •General but specific aspects addressed

•Limited and specific •A string of loosely related concerns

3. Statement of Problem(s) or Issue(s)

Never explicit or focused	0
"Woolly"	1
Clearly implicit (engaged)	2
Clear explicit statement	3

4. Choice of Treatment: (circle choice)

•wholly expository •Expository with narrative component

•Chiefly narrative but relevant •Chiefly narrative and irrelevant

Elaboration, Argument:

Evidence:

Mostly opinion or general statement without support	0
Support, but general or superficial	1
Some illustration in support	2
Most points well supported	3

Quality of reasoning:

Nil	0
Mostly opinion	1
Some logical foundation	2
Strongly reasoned	3

Balance:

Entirely one-sided	0
Acknowledgement of other perspective	1
Consideration of more that one perspective	2
Balanced presentation of issue	3

Conclusions:

Lacking	0
Inadequate, unsupported	1
Generally sound	2
Sound and reasonably detailed	3

Author's confidence, competence, reasoning

Knowledgeability:

No evidence of grasp of the issue	0
Limited or partial understanding	1
Good sense of the issue and its scope	2
Precise understanding of the issue and its scope	3

Investment:

Little evidence of commitment or interest	0
Strong viewpoint but little else	1
Firm viewpoint, well substantiated	2, 3